

In the Pull of the West: Resistance, Concessions and Showing off from the Stalinist Practice in Hungarian culture after 1956¹

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The article explores the representation of Western culture in Hungarian journalism, print media, and public life in the months following the 1956 revolution, when the party lost its strict control over Hungarian society and only gradually was able to reassert its dominance in all spheres of life. Did representations of Western culture really constitute a kind of resistance, or should they perhaps be understood as concessions to prevalent public opinion? Or did they in fact harmonize in some way with the actual intentions of the people who crafted cultural policy? How did the content of newspapers begin to change in November 1956, clashing with the earlier “socialist cultural canon” by presenting formerly censured or anathematized Western cultural products and actors? How was the supply of movies adjusted to public opinion and then slowly readjusted to correspond to former norms? How did theater programs and plans for book publishing reflect the uncertainty of the period, resulting in the publication of works and performance of productions later criticized for bringing values to the stage that were contrary to the spirit of socialism? In this paper, I analyze a provisional period in which earlier norms of journalism, print media, and cultural life were partially suspended and the party made little or no real attempts to reassert Stalinist norms. Moreover, in this period the party did not deny or bring a stop to the de-Stalinization of cultural life, although it did repress open forms of cultural resistance to the Kádár-government.

Keywords: communist media, journalism, cultural transfers, cultural policy, de-Stalinization, resistance, revolution

Soon a ‘new voice’ joined the buzz of the different languages. Jazz music rang out, and the dance started. First a black pair in white pullovers and britches started to follow the sound of the music with a miraculous sense of rhythm. In a little while, other dancers joined them... People laughed when a black fellow invited a Soviet girl to dance boogie-woogie. The Soviet girl, however hard she tried, could not follow her partner.²

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2 “Izgalmas versenyek, olimpiai rekordok az olimpia hétfői napján,” *Népszabadság*, November 27, 1956.

This is how the daily *Népszabadság* reported the rest-day of the summer Olympic Games in Melbourne in 1956. This coverage was the first in Hungary to mention the Western fashion frenzy, boogie (and rock and roll), in a positive way since 1948, only a few weeks after the violent suppression of the revolution. But it harmonized well with the policy of peaceful coexistence of the Khrushchev regime. This short report was also the first occasion when *Népszabadság* came out from behind the closed world of politics (strikes, declarations, condemnations of resistance) and slowly started to act like a newspaper again instead of a political fly-bill.

The report was printed at a moment when the Kádár government gave up its last efforts to try to find a compromise with the representatives of the workers and intellectuals and was about to finalize its resolution of December 4.³ The forums of publicity were narrow: only a few editorships were functioning, and the re-launch of any newspaper had to be allowed by the leading bodies of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party.⁴ The book publishing industry was paralyzed, and cinemas and theaters were closed for weeks, and later only opened in the afternoon because of the curfew, which lasted until April of the following year.

There were spectacular and well-explored cases of open resistance, from the "not a single word to Kádár" strike led by journalists⁵ to the production of illegal newspapers and leaflets.⁶ Even the central organ of the party tried to protest against defining the relationship between party leadership and communist journalists in a pre-1953 way. Others drew back into passive resistance and refused to publish. The Hungarian Writers' Association and the Association of Hungarian Journalists became important bases of resistance until the suspension of their autonomy, while their representatives also parleyed with the government.⁷

After November 4, Hungarian intellectuals followed a variety of trajectories and adopted an array of attitudes towards the government. Some left the country and continued to fight from abroad. Some undertook open resistance, risking

3 The December 4 resolution of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party was the first official document to define the factors behind the "counterrevolution." It named four responsible agents: 1. the Rákosi–Gerő wing; 2. Imre Nagy and his circle; 3. the "reactionary forces" of the Horthy and capitalist regimes; 4. "international imperialism."

4 The HSWP authorized the relaunch of all newspapers one by one.

5 Sipos, "A Népszabadság letiltott cikke 1956 novemberében," 131–44.

6 Révész, *Egyetlen élet: Gimes Miklós története*, 330–49; Murányi, "A magyar sajtó története 1948-tól 1988-ig," 213.

7 See: Ständeisky, *Az írók és a hatalom 1956–1963*; Cseh and Pór, *Zárt, bizalmas, számozott*.

imprisonment or even the death penalty. Others tried to cooperate with the new regime, hoping to preserve some of the achievements of 1956 and the de-Stalinization process, while many people decided to fall silent as a form of passive resistance. There were also intellectuals who cooperated with Kádár, whether wholeheartedly or striving for position and influence, or convincing themselves they were more useful to the people in these positions than others would be.

In this article I explore a particular way of assuming distance from official ideological framings and expressing criticism: the reception of Western pop-culture in post-1956 Hungarian public life. I examine Western pop-culture (i.e. what was characterized as “bourgeois” culture) in the Hungarian media and the debates to which it gave rise. Did it really constitute a kind of resistance, or could it rather be understood as a series of concessions to public opinion? Or did it actually help the regime achieve the goals of its cultural policy? In fact, all of these interpretations are valid. First, the references to Western culture in the early press of the Kádár era were intended to create distance from the cultural policy of Hungarian Stalinism, which Kádár’s propaganda tried to dismiss as hopelessly and unnecessarily orthodox and dictatorial. However, the re-importation of images from Western popular culture into official socialist debates created new ways of developing criticism and critical attitudes towards Kádár’s cultural policy too. I explore this double reception in thematic order by focusing on commercial culture, film, theater, literature, jazz, and art in two of the most important newspapers of the time: the party daily *Népszabadság* and the official youth magazine *Magyar Ifjúság*.

Western Commercial Culture in the Press

Népszabadság sarcastically noted the shift that took place between November 1956 and February 1957: “Nobody was enthusiastic about the gray journals of the Rákosi regime, while—lo!—the new, democratic press is received with such huge interest. Recently, they were burning newspapers on the streets, but now they keep queuing.”⁸ The author pointed out that the popularity of the youth weekly *Magyar Ifjúság* was not based on cultural value. (*Magyar Ifjúság* was allegedly so popular that it was sold on the streets in record time and after that one could

8 Géza Molnár, “Csikorgó fagyban,” *Népszabadság*, February 8, 1957.

get it only from under the counter, when buying an issue of the official party paper *Népszabadság* or the trade union paper *Népakarat*).

What was the secret of *Magyar Ifjúság*? The first issue of the paper was released on January 5 1957, at a time when there were still many youth organizations and the Hungarian Communist Youth League, which later came to own the paper, had not yet been founded. On the front, children sleighing and Miss France were smiling at the reader. A genre that had previously been rebuked as the quintessence of American trash culture returned. The first comic strip in *Magyar Ifjúság* was a French translation (Misi and Döme Meet the Dragon), but in the second issue Hungarian characters appeared: The Adventures of the Dogs Blöki and Csöpi.⁹ This constituted a surprising concession, since even in 1954 official cultural policy labelled comics as a tool that had been used to teach violence and condition people for war: “These books contain depictions of murders, sadistic stories, terrifying adventures, cruelty and bloodcurdling horror, and they are illustrated”. They were even associated with fascism: “Many of these adventures are based on one single supernatural hero, who—as fascists suggested—is the only one able to save the crowd from their troubled situation by using power.”¹⁰

Among the novelties of *Magyar Ifjúság* was a Tarzan serial, which was also banned after 1948 as inferior American mass culture. “Tarzan Wins” was published as a promotion of the newly launched Tarzan series of Kossuth Publishing House. The first part, Tarzan of the Apes, had already been published in late 1956 by Budapest Press, and was continued by the party publishing house in 1957.¹¹ Further Tarzan volumes only arrived in the mid-1960s. The plans of Európa Publishing House for 1957 included the crime stories of Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle, and Európa planned to print open-end crime stories following Western patterns: “In other countries, separate clubs are organized to solve such books, so we can hope that this idea will be welcome here, too,” heralded the youth paper.¹²

The first issue also introduced Gina Lollobrigida and Luis Procuna, a Mexican actor-toreador. With this, an avalanche of Western stars began.¹³ Over the course of the upcoming weeks, people were able to read about the cultic

9 Pál Veres and István Endrődi, “Blöki és Csöpi nyaklánc,” *Magyar Ifjúság*, January 12, 1957.

10 “Tarzan győz,” *Magyar Ifjúság*, January 5, 1957.

11 Burroughs, *Tarzan, a dzsungel fia*; Burroughs, *Tarzan visszatérése*.

12 G. I., “Dosztojevszkij és Conan Doyle, Babits Mihály és Sigmund Freud,” *Népszabadság*, January 1, 1957.

13 “Melyik tetszik?,” *Magyar Ifjúság* 1, January 5, 1957; “Esmeralda – Gina Lollobrigida,” *Magyar Ifjúság*, January 5, 1957; Ferenc Simon Gy., “Dr. Torreádor,” *Magyar Ifjúság*, January 5, 1957.

James Dean, the rock and roll icon Elvis Presley, actresses Elisabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe (who in November 1964 could only be seen on the silver screen in *The Misfits*). *Népszabadság* tried to catch up with this tempo: in early 1957, it portrayed Kim Novak besides Monroe and Taylor.

The January 5 issue of *Magyar Ifjúság* also launched a column on world fashion, and it included an interview with András Bágya, head of department of light music at Magyar Rádió, about jazz.¹⁴ Even stranger things happened: sexuality was seen as one of the opiates of the decadent West, but not reporting on it. “Wow, how pretty,” proclaimed the Christmas edition of *Népszabadság* in a caption above a picture of Miss France in a bikini. The typist from Nice greeted the Hungarian readers from the back of a donkey.¹⁵ *Magyar Ifjúság* also captured the attention of its readership with a beauty queen in issue one, and it continued with a portrait of actress Francoise Arnoul in a bikini and a handsome French in tabloid style.¹⁶ Allegedly “decadent” and “commercial” Western habits also penetrated the Hungarian environment: the weekly showed the winner of the beauty contest of the National Association of Hungarian Students.¹⁷ However, a month later the same newspaper condemned “bourgeois hypocrisy” for surrounding beauty contests with fame and glitter while the winner could be rejected as a teacher in FRG.¹⁸ A national beauty contest was not held again until 1985.

Kádár himself spoke highly critically of the work of *Népszabadság* on the session of the Budapest party activists on January 16 1957:

But it is inequitable for the central organ of the party to report murder cases with mighty letters on the front page and [spice up] the article, which is of theoretical importance, with a picture of a half-naked dancer, while they move the important declarations of the party and the government and the important manifestations of the international workers' movement to different pages so that you can't find the sequel.¹⁹

14 András Bágya, “Merre tart a jazz?,” *Magyar Ifjúság*, January 5, 1957.

15 “Hű de csinos!,” *Népszabadság*, December 25, 1956.

16 “Csak tizenhat éven felülieknek,” “Ki akar férjhez menni?,” *Magyar Ifjúság*, January 12, 1957.

17 “Gáts Livia a szépségkirálynő,” *Magyar Ifjúság*, March 15, 1957.

18 “Szégyen-e szépségkirálynőnek lenni?,” *Magyar Ifjúság*, May 31, 1957.

19 Némethné Vágyi and Urbán, *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt ideiglenes vezető testületeinek jegyzőkönyvei II*, 51.

We can surely add the report from Paris to the “bourgeois tendencies.” The report invited Hungarian readers to popular striptease bars like Foliés Bergère and Venus to offer accounts of “colourful” shows and dancers covered by fig-leaves. However, for the sake of order, the report added that a French worker cannot afford such fun (“my friend, Beuval, earns this money [the price of 3 bottles of champagne] for a week’s worth of work at Renault”), and it made specific mention of homeless people lying under newspapers by the Seine River.²⁰

At the end of January, the Provisional Executive Committee of Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (HSWP) discussed the work of *Népszabadság* and *Magyar Ifjúság* and concluded that, though their work was not flawless, they could be regarded as supportive of the government, unlike the Hungarian News Agency and *Népakarat*.²¹ It was not easy to achieve a balance: people who wanted to make a newspaper different from Stalinist times had to follow the expectations of the party and the audience at the same time, the majority of which would not bother listening to talk of any of the outstanding Soviet achievements, but rather thirsted for news and information about the West. It seemed that interesting journals could only be edited with Western star-portraits, technical novelties, and a pinch of eroticism in the first months of 1957. However, even after this, exprobatory path-seeking efforts were paved with some piquant circuits. What else could have explained the fact that two months later the notion of the lascivious nightlife of the West was again “debunked” in a lengthy article. The journalist (a protocol guest of the newly launched Budapest–Brussels flight) balanced his report on Boeuf sur le Toit club by visiting an anti-fascist place of memory, the fortress of Brendonk.²²

Concessions and Renewed Cultural Policy: Ideology Disappears

Kádár also accused the editors of *Népszabadság* of smuggling a characterization of the West as the “greater world” into the newspaper.²³ Nevertheless, the government assumed that there were anti-Soviet emotions among the population,

20 B. Gy., “A Pigalle titkai – Meztelen görölk között a “Venus”-ban,” *Népszabadság*, January 1, 1957.

21 István Friss called the news editing practice of the national news agency “counterrevolutionary propaganda,” and he labeled *Népakarat* “anti-police.” Némethné Vágyi and Urbán, *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt ideiglenes vezető testületeinek jegyzőkönyvei II*, 33.

22 István Árkus, “Az éjszakai Brüsszel,” *Népszabadság*, March 10, 1957; Idem, “A breendonki erőf figyelmeztetése a mához,” *Népszabadság*, March 13, 1957.

23 “What ‘greater world’ is something without the Soviet Union, without the socialist world? That is the capitalist world, and don’t write ‘greater world’, but write news from the capitalist world. After reading

which is best illustrated by the films that were offered after November 1956. Soviet films disappeared for months: they were cautiously reintroduced beginning in February 1957 by local movie companies. *Népszabadság* printed the first cinema program on November 29, when cinemas were open between 11am and 4pm, according to the curfew. The selection of films was based on the 169 films confirmed by the General Directorate for Films: 29 Hungarian, 33 from socialist countries, and the rest (107 films, i.e. 63% percent, well over half) were from Western countries. Felszabadulás played *Fan-Fan the Tulip*, Csillag played *The Red and the Black*, Tinódi played the comedy *Papa, Mama, My Woman and Me* (presented for the French Film Days in 1956), and Toldi opted for *The Thief of Bagdad*. The list of licensed Soviet films was compiled only in January “with the political caution justified by the political atmosphere.” Salaries for employees in the movie theaters depended in part on the number of people who actually came to see the movies. However, this factor was no longer taken into consideration in the case of Soviet films.²⁴

The audiences for Western films, in contrast, were huge in 1957. The share of the viewers of Soviet films fell back significantly, even compared to 1956, when this tendency had begun. In 1957, every second cinema-goer opted for a Western film, while the number of Soviet films did not reach 10 percent of the total.

	Hungarian	Soviet	Socialist	Other	Mixed
1956	18	19	18	42	3
1957	22	9	13	52	4

Chart 1. Distribution of Hungarian audience by the place of origin of films in 1957
(Source: Hungarian National Archives (MNL OL) – The report of the Executive Committee of the Metropolitan Council on the operation of cinemas)²⁵

As the General Directorate for Films put it: “we strove to restore the tranquility of mind of the audience with films.” In the name of tranquility, 40 films were presented from capitalist countries, along with 12 Hungarian and

the paper, I have the feeling that Dulles is fighting heroic battles for the peace of mankind and only dark forces hinder him.” Némethné Vágyi and Urbán, *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt ideiglenes vezető testületeinek jegyzőkönyvei II*, 40.

²⁴ Report for the Metropolitan Council EC on the work of Budapest cinemas. (November 1957). Hungarian National Archives (=Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, hereafter MNL OL) XIX-I-22 16. d.; András Berkesi to the General Directorate of Film (July 22, 1957). MNL OL XIX-I-22 25. d.

²⁵ MNL OL XIX-I-22 16. d.

63 socialist films. The composition of the 98 films of the previous year was the following: 9 Hungarian, 59 socialist, and 31 Western. In 1958, 33.3 percent and in 1959 28.4 percent of the film premiers were imported from the non-socialist countries, so opening to Western cultural products had begun earlier, actually as early as 1954. In 1956/57, the proportion of the films from socialist countries dropped temporarily.²⁶ *Magyar Ifjúság* reported that the negotiations would begin with the Motion Picture Export Company in Paris at the end of January 1957.²⁷ Moreover, the negotiations were successful, and three films were accepted in 1957.²⁸ The first one was the most commercial: *Trapeze*, starring Gina Lollobrigida, Tony Curtis, and Burt Lancaster. So Hollywood returned to Hungary a year after the fall of the revolution with a spectacular feature film.

Nagyvilág, the Hungarian journal for international literature, which had been founded on the model of the Soviet *Inostrannaya Literatura*, underwent a similar shift. Its first issue was published in October 1956, and its programmatic editorial was written by György Lukács, who had been marginalized under the policy of Andrey Aleksandrovich Zhdanov known as Zhdanovism, according to which the government should exert strict control over cultural policy and foster extreme anti-Western bias. The philosopher-aesthete emphasized that the seclusion after 1948 was the continuation of earlier Hungarian provincialism and was a consequence of weakness and uncertainty, both under Horthy and Rákosi: "Only one kind of struggle can be effective against provincialism: real, first-hand knowledge about the real state of the world, and the evaluation and of the present phenomena and streams of literature based on the autonomous procession and sophisticated arrangement of the seriously collected store of learning."²⁹ The journal was not abolished, but it was relaunched in the spring of 1957. Of course, the editorial in the April issue was not written by Lukács, who was being held in Snagov as a member of the Imre Nagy group, but by László Kardos, the leader of the Department of World Literature at University of Budapest. However, the program remained unaltered: "The literature that secludes itself from the inspirations, lessons, and experience of the brotherly beauty of contemporary world literature is threatened by the danger of withering,

26 Magyar Statisztikai Évkönyv 1954–1960.

27 "Amerikai filmek a mozikban?," *Magyar Ifjúság*, January 19, 1957.

28 Information on Hungarian–American film relations between 1957 and 1964 (August 5, 1964). MNL OL XIX-I-22 90. d.

29 György Lukács, "Magyar irodalom – világirodalom," 3–5.

dehumanization, graying, and monotony. Wide-open windows all around are a precondition of the real development of our national culture.”³⁰

At the same time, the programs of the theaters were similar to those of the cinemas. The spring program had already been decided before the revolution. The new performances continued the de-Stalinization line. Soviet plays were not performed. Theaters were just as eager as cinemas to avoid sparking public protests. In the spring of 1957, *Népszabadság* summarized the mentality of the months after the suppression of the revolution as the negative culmination of the process started in 1953: “slowly they ‘adjusted’ the ‘old, good, certain-success’ operettas, appealing classics, and in the best case new Hungarian slapstick comedies, which are evasive in content and low-grade in performance.” After November, “the shudder from the messages (even progressive bourgeois messages!) and the service of philistine illusions and lies” were palpable.³¹

The tendencies were similar in theaters and cinemas: Soviet plays disappeared, earlier Hungarian “blockbusters,” classical plays, and several Western light comedies appeared. József Révai, the ideologist in charge of cultural affairs during the Rákosi era in his notorious March article attacked “ideological clarity” in theater life through a revival of the plays of Ferenc Molnár and Ferenc Herczeg.³²

What was playing in the theaters on that day? In addition to three classical plays (Victor Hugo: *Ruy Blas*; G. B. Shaw: *Mrs Warren’s Profession* and *You Can Never Tell*), there were also two post-World War I Italian comedies: one by Dario Niccodemi and Pirandello’s unconventional *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The latter was premiered in 1957. According to a critic writing for *Nők Lapja*, an illustrated weekly, the director highlighted Pirandello’s playfulness and subdued his philosophical turbidity.³³ Four of the remaining five productions were operettas: three Hungarian plays (*Nuptials of Ipafa*; *Legend of Tabán*; *Graf of Luxembourg*) and one Austrian play (Benatzky: *The King with the Umbrella*). The fifth was *Olympia* by Ferenc Molnár. So the offer was restricted to comedies and light musical performances, complemented with two operas (Bánk bán, Don Juan). László Németh’s *Galilei* and two social critical comedies (a contemporary French satire in crime-story form by Marc-Gilbert Sauvajon and a Yugoslav

30 László Kardos, “Vihar után,” 3–4.

31 László Kálmán, “Megjegyzések a vidéki színházak műsortervéhez,” *Népszabadság*, September 3, 1957.

32 József Révai, “Eszmei tisztaságot!,” *Népszabadság*, March 7, 1957.

33 Béla Mátrai-Betegh, “Hat szerep keres egy szerzőt,” *Nők Lapja*, January 31, 1957.

comedy by Branislav Nušić), which were first performed before the revolution, had been cancelled since January.

According to a March 15 article in *Élet és Irodalom* demanding order in culture, the situation at the houses of culture was even worse:

In the Young Guard Cultural Home *One Kiss and Nothing Else* is played. Danuvia Cultural Home plays the comedy by László Fodor. The István Pataki House of Culture plays *The Moonlight Groom*. MOM House of Culture plays *Let's Dance Mambo*, the Zsigmond Móricz House of Culture plays *Drum Duel* and *Rock and Roll*, and the House of Culture of the Duna Shoe Factory played a comedy entitled *Bubus* by Gábor Vaszary.³⁴

In the subsequent months the popular French playwright, Jean Anouilh, also known in Hungary between 1945 and 1948, returned to the stage with *Eurydice* and *Rendezvous in Senlis*, along with other entertaining plays, such as Dario Niccodemi's *Morning, Noon and Night*, which the reviewer of *Népszabadság* found a "real Italian orange juice, does not bemuse, does not intoxicate, does not have strength or alcoholic content, but is bland and refreshing."³⁵

In the case of theaters, there was no such central body as for film import decisions: theaters as creative workshops composed their own yearly plans and submitted them to the Ministry of Culture. Of course, they paid regard to proportions, and the necessity of including an appropriate number of contemporary Hungarian, Soviet, socialist, and classical plays in their programs. These program plans were discussed by the leaders of the Ministry of Culture in the second half of 1957, and plays were accepted which later caused the biggest problems. However, the conference emphasized that the number of Soviet and socialist plays should be raised and propagated more intensely (Vsevolod Vishnevsky's *Optimist Tragedy* was the core drama in that year), and plans were also made to cut back the number of "products of low-level bourgeois literature." They also criticized theaters for trying to win over audiences by compromising principles: "theater directors in the capital have been fighting for a recent Western play for weeks." Nevertheless, after the revolution theaters could not help offering numerous foreign plays: most of the writers did not write, so there

34 Kálmán Sándor, "Üzleti siker – Irodalmi szabadság – Kultúrpolitika," *Élet és Irodalom*, March 15, 1957.

35 "Színházi esték," *Népszabadság*, February 13, 1957.

were not enough new contemporary Hungarian plays. The theater with the worst proportion offered 11 premiers of which only 2 were Hungarian.³⁶

In 1957, the inclusion of earlier discredited leftist authors was continued with Federico Garcia Lorca. In April, the National Theater in Budapest showed *Blood Wedding*, in the autumn the National Theater of Miskolc opted for *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Several theaters included *Of Mice and Men* by Steinbeck and *Before Sunset* by Gerhart Hauptmann. The Attila József Theater selected an Italian play by Gian Paolo Callegari (*The Girls Who Burned out Early*), which reflected on the so called Montesi-scandal. Some other plays added to the Western socially critical pieces (*The Little Foxes* by Lilian Hellmann and *The Diary of Anne Frank*), while *Naples Millionaire* by Eduardo di Filippo and a comedy by Victorien Sardou represented the lighter line.

The two problematic plays might have passed as critical plays by Western authors, one targeting the circumstances in capitalist society and the other slamming the American occupation of Japan. As reviews make clear, the cultural watchdogs only attacked these plays after they had been brought to the stage. *The Egg* by Félicien Marceau was heralded as a drama unveiling the lies of “bourgeois society,” in which one must sacrifice all moral values in order to prosper.³⁷ However, cultural policy makers and critics soon realized that it represented Existentialism, which was only tolerated in very small doses after 1953.³⁸ Later criticism tried to insist that the drama was harmful since it allegedly propagated nihilism and cynicism, and the way it typified “petty bourgeois points

36 László Kálmán, “Megjegyzések a vidéki színházak műsortervéhez,” *Népszabadság*, September 3, 1957.

37 “Egy héttel »A tojás« bemutatója előtt,” *Magyar Nemzet*, October 30, 1957.

38 Jean-Paul Sartre was accepted in the Soviet bloc first on a political basis and only afterwards as artist, and hardly at all as an ideologue. Sartre supported peaceful coexistence and visited Moscow in 1954. In January 1956, his play *Nekrassov*, a satire of the anti-communist hysteria of the West, was also shown in the József Katona Theater. György Kemény, “J. P. Sartre: Főbelövendők klubja,” *Szabad Nép*, February 15 1956. However, the following reminiscence tells of the variety of responses: “June 27, 1956, József Katona Theater, Sartre: Nekrassov, the moment of the first act caused earthquake in the theater. The swindler who climbed into the flat of the communist journalist through the window escaping from the police is trying to explain the weird situation: Violetta Ferrari is interestedly listening to Zoltán Várkonyi and gives cool-headed, clever, surprising and confusing answers. And then the wizard-of-words swindler loses his temper and cries out: ‘You are a bitch!’ In 1956, in Hungary a bad-egg phony calls the communist journalist a bitch. Scandal! After these words, the ceiling almost foundered in the downtown theater [...] Some people’s delicate palate was hurt by something rude having been said publicly, some were appalled by the fact that a communist journalist had been called a bitch... And many thought: at last somebody aired it...” Gábor Szigethy, “Vilcsi.”

of views” as characteristic of all mankind and gave up hope for change was not acceptable.³⁹ As a critic writing for *Népszabadság* contended,

[t]his writer’s approach does not know humanity, benignity, or moral sense, he does not believe in anything anymore. Its ideal is the perspective of a wood louse, where nothing but instincts remain, you do not have to care for anything, you must not think... This is the denial of everything that is human, this is animal life, it reveals the last moments of a culture. That is why this anti-human art is unacceptable to us, even if it draws a harsh picture of the gray petty bourgeois soul and offers several well-crafted characters. It is unacceptable because it reflects the anarchist worldview against which we are fighting a hard, passionate, and enduring struggle.⁴⁰

Theater critic Ferenc Gy. Simon directly blamed the actors and actresses for elevating such an equivocal play by doing an outstanding performance with great enthusiasm.⁴¹

The other play in the crossfire was an American one depicting life in occupied Japan after 1945 with a sense of irony. Some theater experts thought it was appropriate,⁴² but partisan critics found *The Teahouse of the August Moon* too “back-slapping.” Indeed, in their contention it is embodied the propagation of the American occupation: “the holder of the Pulitzer Prize and the voluntary PR-manager of the US Army makes very tricky propaganda about the humanitarian goodness of the occupying army of imperialism.”⁴³

Book publishing was similar in its practices and the shifts it underwent. The medium-term plans of workshops were accepted by a central body. One can observe the rise of commercial culture here, too, i.e. the influence of considerations of profitability and public demand. However, the plans were compiled in a situation of unrest, and the Ministry of Culture could only discuss

39 János Komlós, “A tojás,” *Magyar Nemzet*, November 14, 1957; Gábor Antal, “Néhány megjegyzés a Nemzeti Színház új évadjáról,” *Magyar Nemzet*, November 17, 1957.

40 Kemény, “A tojás.”

41 Ferenc Simon Gy., “A színpad virágai,” *Magyar Ifjúság*, December 13, 1957.

42 “And if we accepted this play as a witty comedy, we should be happy—and lately there have been such occasions more and more frequently—that we could get to know an interesting theater play from the West again.” István Gábor, “Teaház az augusztusi Holdhoz,” *Magyar Nemzet*, October 26, 1957.

43 Ferenc Simon Gy., “A színpad virágai.”

the quarterly plans of the publishing houses as of the second half of 1957.⁴⁴ It was too late, however, to make significant changes. The plans of Európa Kiadó, the publishing house with the profile of world literature, had 28 foreign operas for the third quarter of 1957: six Soviet, eight “socialist,” and fourteen “Western” works. The five volumes of “contemporary” “people’s democratic” literature included Franz Kafka and Bertold Brecht. However, the Ministry intervened in the first case. Kafka only began to become acceptable to the cultural organs of the regime in the mid-1960s, as was signaled by a Kafka-study and the publication of one of his novels.⁴⁵ The long-time “exiled” Brecht was permitted to return with the *Threepenny novel*, and in April *The Good Person of Szechwan* was staged in the József Katona Theater,⁴⁶ followed by further Brecht plays in 1958. Among the fourteen Western authors, six were contemporary. The Hungarian audience may well have remembered Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, W. Somerset Maugham, and Jean Cocteau from before 1948, while novels by the Indian Mulk Raj Anand had been published under Rákosi, too. The first Hungarian translation by Alberto Moravia (*The Roman Stories*) was published in 1957, but the real sensation was the publication of the novel by Françoise Sagan. Her first novel, *Hello Sadness*, was a strange composition even in the French cultural landscape at the time, so its Hungarian publication was really surprising, though Polish audiences had been able to read it since 1956. Nevertheless, it had become common practice by then for publishers to bring out works from the West that were questionable according to the ideology of the regime, although these works were only available to small readership because of issues of circulation. Sagan, who introduced her readers to the world of rebel teenagers, was usually labelled an existentialist, but her book was much better received than the two abovementioned plays. Its novelty, strange honesty, and credible reportage could be emphasized, and this constituted an advantage. It could be characterized as a presentation of “the whole disturbing and mysterious field, about which we only know the outbursts: from rock and roll to the matricides, patricides, and infanticides committed out of boredom”.⁴⁷ However, the publication of Sagan was not the general rule, but rather the exception, a kind of peculiarity which was much desired by the intellectuals to satisfy rather than whet the appetite. As László Kardos put it

44 Report on the July 16 1957 session of the conference of deputy ministers. MNL OL M–KS XIX-I-4-eee 1. d.

45 Tibor Szobotka, “Kafka kettős világa,” 87–112; Kafka, “*A kastély*.”

46 István Hermann, “Jó embert keresünk,” *Élet és Irodalom*, March 29, 1957.

47 P. F., “A “Bonjour tristesse” magyarul,” *Magyar Nemzet*, November 22, 1957.

when writing about the treatment of the new phenomena of Western literature in earlier years, “curiosity slowly distorted into actual thirst, and thirst spelled illusions about value for the thirsty which were not proportional to the real values of Western literature.”⁴⁸

The Return of Banned Genres

Official cultural policy made its first timid steps toward the acceptance of jazz after Stalin’s death. This tendency continued after 1956, although it did not lead to the support of “decent” jazz smoothly. Jazz and other practically banned forms, genres, and products of Western culture were regarded as destructive and decadent. As a consequence of the anti-jazz campaign, which began as early as 1946 in the Soviet Union, many jazz musicians were sent to labor camps. Jazz was condemned as a tool of dehumanization, the very opposite of a form of art that was culturally valuable, and even a weapon of American imperialism, since it allegedly killed human feelings and thoughts therefore turned the individual into a cog-wheel of American war machinery. In Hungary, popular jazz melodies did not entirely disappear. Some of them were still played at bars. A circular letter of the Union of Working Youth (Dolgozó Ifjúság Szövetsége, or DISZ) proves that even the communist youth organization had to make concessions to the interests of youngsters: some American songs (“In the Mood,” “Chattanooga Choo-Choo”) were even accepted in DISZ clubs.⁴⁹

The shift in jazz policy in the Soviet bloc began in 1953. Jazz was also included in radio programs, and more and more jazz hits were played in bars and clubs. New ideological explanations were given: the roots of the genre allegedly were found in folk music, jazz was understood as the music of the American black population, so it was the music of the oppressed.⁵⁰ Jazz of course remained part of the cultural palate after 1956. The magazine *Rádióújáság* recommended the music of the American Gerry Mulligan sextet for listeners who “had been denied the opportunity to form their own opinions,” and it criticized the earlier “narrow-minded” and “hard-shell” cultural policy.⁵¹ However, jazz had deeper roots—and larger audiences—in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Jazz bands from these two countries took part in some of the biggest jazz concerts of 1957, too. In July,

48 László Kardos, “Nyugati könyvek,” *Magyar Nemzet*, December 25, 1957.

49 Ryback, *Rock around the Block*, 11–13.

50 “A modern jazz mesterei,” *Rádióújáság*, January 7, 1957.

51 “Az amerikai néger Hot Shots együttes Magyarországon,” *Népszabadság*, January 18, 1958.

Polish Hot Jazz performed in Budapest, followed by the Karel Vlach Orchestra from Prague in September and the American Hot Shots in January 1958.⁵²

When *Népszabadság* emphasized that Elisabeth Charles, the Scottish singer of Hot Jazz, was an extraordinary example of “true jazz singing without unnecessary writhing or false, external tools,” it targeted some spontaneous tendencies in Budapest bars. A phenomenon that the Metropolitan Council had already detected between 1953 and 1955 began to return to the places of entertainment: “The bands, seeing the lack of orientation, thought everything is possible, and they can smuggle American songs into their shows without any restriction. Moreover, they tried to score and perform the Hungarian songs in Western styles.”⁵³ “Wildings,” as this performance style was called, also appeared after 1956, although cultural policy demanded an aesthetic jazz style without wild improvisation. The embrace of official jazz was set back by the events of the international jazz festival in Budapest in the summer of 1958, when some of the groups and members of the audience did a “dervish St. Vitus’s dance”: “some of the youngsters in the hall forgot themselves, and forgot about their fellows, and they improvised a turbulent, wild fury under the rock and roll music,” lamented the party daily, rebuking both the participants and the organizers.⁵⁴

Rock, or as it was often called beat, was only fostered by the Hungarian Young Communist League (Magyar Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség, KISZ) around 1964, after a comprehensive survey on youth pastimes. From this point on, efforts were made to shepherd the “guitar bands” within the walls of KISZ clubs and houses of culture. However, 1956/57 was still a time of reluctance, even in the West. In addition to generational conflicts, this reluctance was nourished by the century-long opposition of highbrow and lowbrow culture,⁵⁵ and also the averseness of European elites to Americanization.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, in Western Europe Bill Haley’s and Elvis Presley’s music made its way through, while cultural mass production quickly exploited the new craze in the pursuit of its material interests. *Expresso Bongo*, a 1958 musical by Wolf Mankowitz (which was also performed in Hungary

52 B. T., “Lengyel esztrádeggyüttes Budapesten,” *Népszabadság*, July 5, 1957; Péter Molnár G., “Sokkal igényesebben!,” *Népszabadság*, July 25, 1957.

53 Report of the Cultural Department of the Metropolitan Council on public entertainment (September 9, 1954) BFL XXIII. 114. 16. kisdoboz.

54 “Utószó a jazz-»fesztiválhoz«,” *Népszabadság*, July 27, 1958.

55 Western European—mostly state-run—radios were also unwilling to play rock. Change was enforced by pirate radios in the mid-1960s, while in socialist countries music programs of RFE and Luxembourg Radio had similar effects. Brugge, “Swinging Sixties made in Czechoslovakia,” 143–55.

56 Poiger, “Rock ‘n’ Roll, Female Sexuality and the Cold War Battle over German Identities,” 579–83.

in 1963), showed this process from a critical perspective, though it was in fact a successful part of the same music industry at the time.

At the level of official cultural policy, in the mid-1950s the typical attitude toward rock and roll music was rigid rejection, so it was rather surprising that rock and roll was mentioned in a relatively gentle, almost positive context after November 1956. In January 1957, Hungarian journalists started to introduce the greatest Western stars to the Hungarian public, and they left behind the usual pejorative insinuations. József Vető's report from Vienna described the so-called "Halbstarke" (rock hooligans) almost as waggish music fans, who were called "jampec" in Hungary, which meant a kind of swaggering dandy. Vető emphasized the irresistible ancient power of the music, a notion that would only return in the second half of the 1960s: "Even if I do think hard, I cannot remember a tune, one cannot memorize even a tune from this music, but one still feels saturated with it, and one feels that one must follow the astoundingly inflammatory rhythm."⁵⁷ He even wrote appreciatively of how the Austrian audience of the Bill Haley film *Rock Around the Clock* had stomped, clapped, whistled, and stood up to dance in the projection room. After the film, he was not looking for broken shop windows, but rather noticed that "cheerfulness rings through the neighborhood around the cinema, hundreds, even thousands of people came out dancing in the streets."⁵⁸ *Magyar Ifjúság* also described rock and roll as "thrilling" music in its portrait of Elvis Presley. However, the article downgraded the music of the American idol. The author was rather sympathetic with the enthusiastic youth, and he reminded members of the older generations that they had had their own craze, which also had been intolerable as far as their parents had been concerned.⁵⁹ Moreover, the rhythms of Elvis also could be heard on the radio thanks to the journalist Kitty Havas, who did reports during the New York trip of the Hungarian UN-delegation and purchased some trendy records, among them Elvis and Harry Belafonte, to be broadcast over the Hungarian Radio in June.⁶⁰

In addition to popular music, genres of the visual arts that had long disappeared from public spaces were also revived. In the spring of 1957, the lovers of fine arts (some 71,000 people),⁶¹ could enjoy a peculiar experience.

57 József Vető, "Fékevesztetten: Két viharos óra egy bécsi moziban," *Népszabadság*, February 21, 1957.

58 Ibid.

59 "Örület a huszadik hatványon," *Magyar Ifjúság*, February 2, 1957.

60 "New York-i riport," *Rádióújjság*, June 9, 1957.

61 According to the records of the host institution Műcsarnok. Accessed: September 6, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/mucsarnokidogep/photos/a.603456473069603.1073741828.603442449737672/640994929315757/?type=1&theater>.

After eight years, works of abstract art were displayed again in an exhibition called the Spring Salon. Officially it was not organized by the ministry, and four juries of artists made selections from the materials that had been submitted. One of the juries was assigned to assess abstract works by artists led by Dezső Korniss, who had been expelled from the university in 1948 and had worked with little hope of ever having any public exposure until 1956. A separate room was arranged for abstract pieces, among them *Miska*, a painting by Korniss. It depicted a Hungarian peasant constructed out of geometric shapes. It was not a non-figurative painting in the narrow sense, much like those of Picasso, but the vision of the half and full oval and round plane figures was met with such aversion that Péter Rényi, deputy editor-in-chief at *Népszabadság* could quote disparaging remarks from the guest book: “If artistic freedom means Miska and co., then Révai was right.”⁶²

Most critics welcomed the initiative, but did not argue in favor of the equality of abstract or “naturalist” styles. Rather, they espoused the idea also prevalent in other cultural spheres like literature and book publishing, according to which any denial of exposure to the public will only lead to overvaluation of undesirable tendencies.

However, even those who were receptive to the exhibition and its aims could not help noticing that politics—and “socialist realism”—had almost disappeared. Anna Oelmacher wrote on behalf of those criticizing the government from the left in *Élet és Irodalom*. This group held the plethora of neutral topics and the absolute lack of political commitment as the greatest problem. But from Oelmacher’s view, it was seen as anti-socialism, revisionism, and conscious resistance. “The Spring Salon is a manifestation of petty bourgeois revisionism in the fine arts. [It is an expression of] anarchist freedom that claims independence from the foundations and motion of society.”⁶³

She also played the “national card,” underscoring that deniers of forced Sovietization were adopting foreign (Western) patterns: “But today people claim to be modern who operate with esoteric shapes. And people who kept inciting against Soviet patterns, why have not they turned to our lively and still vibrant traditions, and why make our ‘most modern’ ones outworn Bauhaus art, French surrealism, Dutch constructivism, etc.?” The author representing the platform of Révai jumped to general conclusions from the return of “withered

62 Péter Rényi, “Személyes megjegyzések a Tavaszai Tárlatról,” *Népszabadság*, May 5, 1957.

63 Oelmacher Anna, “Forradalmi tett vagy kispolgári revizionizmus?,” *Élet és Irodalom*, April 5, 1957.

streams”: the call for freedom in art is the denial of party control and socialist cultural policy. In this debate, both sides often referred to the Hundred Flowers Campaign of Mao Zedong, launched in May 1956. It could serve as an argument for openness; it was the idea behind the decisions of the four juries of the Spring Salon, which embraced the idea of separate salons for different streams. And this was the formula used by the leftist equation of artistic freedom with libertinage, denial of party control as an outcry against resistance and revisionism. In their metaphors, they referred to gardens instead of meadows of wildflowers: “Let it be ten or twenty salons, flowers would grow wild without a careful gardener.”⁶⁴ Or as Károly Kiss, secretary of the Central Committee of the HSWP put it in the parliament: “Now they say we should let all flowers bloom and all birds sing, following the example of our Chinese comrades. Our party agrees with the Chinese comrades that all nice, useful, and odorous flowers can bloom, except for poppy flowers. And our party is supportive if all songbirds with a good voice sing, but harmony demands the silencing of ‘good-birds.’”⁶⁵ Journalist and former minister of information Ernő Mihályfi, summarizing the debate in *Élet és Irodalom*, suggested that the policies that might be appropriate in Chinese environment were not applicable in post-(counter)revolutionary Hungary, because the Spring Salon had dredged up streams of thought and art that had already been transcended: “So it is not about deciding the future of newly emerging streams and styles, but tested and well-known old weeds had come to light.”⁶⁶

However, the standpoint of the government remained unclear for contemporary actors. The hardline supporters of the government would have expected greater severity and ideological consistency. However, the cultural policy of the post-1956 communist government directed by György Aczél opted for a more open cultural life and the continuation of the de-Stalinization policies in culture. Paradoxically, the goal of this cultural opening up was to reestablish and strengthen the party’s authority and position in cultural life. This complicated situation provided the background for the relaunch of the monthly literary journal *Nagyvilág* which mediated contemporary Western high culture, as well as for the successful negotiations with Hollywood and the approval of Spring Salon, the forum in which contemporary Western-influenced works of

64 Ibid.

65 Károly Kiss’s speech in the Parliament on May 10, 1957. Országgyűlési napló, 1953. II. kötet (1956. július 30. – 1958. szeptember 26.), 1706.

66 Ernő Mihályfi, “Jegyzetek a vita-tárlatról,” *Élet és Irodalom*, April 19, 1957.

the fine arts were exhibited. In this regard, even official cultural policy tried to represent itself as resistance to the former Stalinist practices. Promoting the transfer of Western culture could be understood as a defense of the de-Stalinization process in culture.

Decision makers on the intermediary levels (at editorial boards, theater offices, organizing committees etc.) found themselves in a situation in which they could try to shape the cultural processes in Hungary. Their contributions were inevitable in the selection, promotion, and publishing of works of Western arts and culture. However, while on the one hand accepting one of these roles after November 1956 was tantamount to an acknowledgement of the Kádár government, on the other hand the people who were in these positions were able to work to ensure the survival of the de-Stalinization tendency and the preservation of some degree of openness. This was important, since it was not clear at all whether or not the Kádár regime would (be able to) continue in this direction. Many of them were against a re-Stalinization process in culture and resisted a supposed move away from the result of de-Stalinization. In other words, they worked against attempts by the regime to slow the relatively still narrow process of cultural openness.

In this mix-up, earlier displaced and allegedly “transcended” contents returned, both from the “bourgeois past” of national culture and the “bourgeois present” of the West. In this regard, Western culture, which was to some extent readmitted after 1953 and then not rejected by the Kádár government, could serve a different role from the place it had been given as a subservient form of culture in the controlled de-Stalinization process. What was received from Western culture was far from being entirely “progressive.” Re-opened channels of transfer created a situation in which some kinds of counterculture could be nourished. This counterculture included ideological and artistic streams alien to Marxism, such as existentialism and abstract art, as well as the spread of popular mass culture.

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